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STATE ALSO FOR H - PLEASE PASS CODEL SCHIFF

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TAGS: OREP PGOV PREL ECON PTER TS

SUBJECT: CODEL SCHIFF MEETINGS WITH THE DEFENSE MINISTER
AND PARLIAMENTARIANS

REF: A. TUNIS 473 AND PREVIOUS
1B. 07 TUNIS 1620 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

11. (C) CODEL Schiff used its July 2 meeting with the Minister of Defense to ask the Minister about the level of cooperation between the two militaries and to, to press for more cooperation on intelligence sharing, and to learn his views on regional issues and on Tunisia's role in the region. The Minister thanked the US for its assistance. He described the military's role and its limited funding and identified the Algerian border as Tunisia's primary security issue. On regional issues he praised President Obama's change in tone toward the Middle East, hoped the United States would continue to call for dialogue among the three communities in Iraq to prevent the country from falling apart; and discussed the links between the Israeli-Palestinian issue and problems in Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. During a lunch with Parliamentarians, Rep. Manzullo raised the issue of the American Cooperative School of Tunis (Ref A) and protested that given US generosity to Tunisia the 9 million dinar (approximately \$6.8 million) tax bill levied against the school was a big concern. End Summary.

Minister of Defense Meeting

12. (U) On July 2, the Congressional delegation led by Representative Adam Schiff called on Defense Minister Morjane. Congressman Schiff was accompanied by Representatives Clifford Stearns, Raymond Green, Donald Manzullo Solomon Ortiz, the Ambassador, and Acting Pol/Econ Counselor (notetaker). The Minister was accompanied by Brigadier General Meddeb, Captain Major Khammasi, Colonel Major Ghorbel, Colonel Major La'ajim and Captain Abid.

13. (C) The Representatives made the following points:

-- Rep. Schiff asked about the military's role regarding security inside the country and the division of responsibilities between the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense. He also asked about the situation on Tunisia's southern border, and what sort of people are trying to cross the border.

-- Rep. Ortiz said the war against terrorism has lasted for seven years and that the US hoped to work to share intelligence and against transnational terrorists. The US

would respond if Tunisia were attacked. He asked if the GOT was receiving the intelligence it needed from the USG.

-- Rep. Sterns provided a short brief on USG policy toward Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran. He asked if the US was headed in the right direction in the Middle East, how Tunisia sees its role in regional issues, and what Tunisia and the US could do together to work on regional issues, especially Iran.

-- Rep. Green indicated that although there was good cooperation between the Tunisian and American military services more could be done to expand opportunities for joint training and sharing of intelligence. He also expressed appreciation for Tunisia's leadership and support for a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

-- Rep. Manzullo asked for the Ministers opinion of the effect of the global financial crisis on stability in the region.

Bilateral military relations

¶4. (C) The Minister said that the GOT wants a strategic partnership with the US based on common goals and interests. Any visit at the Congressional level helps reinforce the relationship between the two countries:

-- Tunisia and the US share common goals due to the GOT's policy of openness and progressiveness. Tunisia has good relations with almost all countries in the world not by accident but by will and choice. The GOT puts a premium on

the development of social rights, education and health. The military receives 4-5 percent of the national budget while nearly 40 percent goes to education.

-- The level of intelligence sharing is good but there is always need for more. The GOT appreciates the ground surveillance radars and unmanned aerial vehicles supplied by the USG that improve border control and reduced dependence on helicopters. General Meddeb added that from the field perspective there could be more intelligence sharing especially regarding terrorist movements in the Sahel region.

He said people can reach their borders in just a few days from Niger, Mali, or Chad.

-- Tunisia appreciates the increase in American assistance over the past two years and hopes that assistance will continue especially FMF, IMET and the fellowship programs.

Military's Role

¶6. (C) The Minister described the GOT's defense policy as not limited to the military but as encompassing all Tunisian institutions. Service in the military is obligatory for all Tunisian men and women are encouraged to serve. However, the enemy may not be an army facing you - defense of the country should be a duty felt by all citizens, especially those in the most remote areas and on the borders. Approximately half the military is occupied with border security. The rest are involved in infrastructure development and humanitarian and disaster assistance, especially in remote areas where the private sector is reluctant to go, and in humanitarian or peacekeeping missions with the UN and the African Union. The security forces under the MOI are responsible for terrorism not the military. The two ministries have joint patrols along the border except in the south where the army is responsible. At times the army has intervened to support the security forces as it did in the 2006-2007 Soliman group case (Ref B). There are direct links between the MOD and MOI, and they need to work together but they also need clear lines of responsibility.

Middle East Regional Issues

¶17. (C) Morjane said terrorism is a new element tied to instability in the region. Even though Afghanistan is far away it still affects Tunisia. If the United States wants to rebuild positive relations, not just with the governments of the Middle East but with the people, it has to work on the Palestinian/Israeli issue the Minister stated. The people of the Middle East do not think the USG is objective on this issue. Algeria is a serious problem. The GOT has good relations with the GOA but has to be prepared for problems along that border because of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb. The financial crisis is also adding to instability because social and economic problems are exploited by terrorists. However, the financial crisis has not affected Tunisia as much because of the Central Bank's control over the financial system.

¶18. (C) On Iraq, Morjane said the GOT hopes the US will continue to call for dialogue between the three communities in Iraq and prevent it from falling apart. Once there is security in Iraq, the GOT will be ready to engage. Tunisia never closed its Embassy in Iraq. The withdrawal of the US military removes the possibility of those working against peace to say they are working for peace.

¶19. (C) The problems in Afghanistan and Iran are linked to the Middle East peace process. Real progress between Israel and the Palestinians would have a positive impact on the whole region. If the US pushes Israel to start a real dialogue with the Palestinians, it will make the US role in Iraq easier. On Afghanistan, President Ben Ali's position is that it is not possible to compromise with the Taliban. The Minister said that solving Afghanistan will take time and money, but an impact is possible. He was more worried about Pakistan. In a recent poll 37 percent of Pakistanis were in favor of the Taliban, while two years ago 80 percent were in their favor. However, in his view, this decrease in popularity could be a negative indicator because it might show that the Taliban's strength and presence had increased and people were more exposed to the Taliban.

¶110. (C) Iran clearly wants to be a regional power, especially in the Gulf. The GOT is in favor of nuclear energy for civilian use. Tunisia's position is that every government has the right to develop nuclear energy but must respect the civilian nature of that energy. He presented to the Parliament June 29 the African Union convention to make Africa a nuclear free zone. He said Tunisia could become the 26th African country to ratify the Convention.

Lunch with Parliamentarians

¶111. (U) President of the Tunisia-United States Parliamentary Friendship Group Tijani Haddad invited the CODEL to lunch the same day with six other Parliamentarians: Nessima Ghannouchi, Saida Agrbi, Taieb Mohnsi, Mohamed Habib Thamer, Faten Ben Amor and Emma Ben Araf.

¶112. (C) Haddad mentioned that he had attended President Obama's inaugural speech and was impressed by the President's vision. He said the United States needed the change to increase its influence in the world. He specifically pointed to the messages of working from the basis of shared and mutual interests and the Administration's willingness to work with those who are willing to negotiate for peace. Representative Schiff gave Tunisia credit for the progress made on social rights and education and said that Tunisia can be a model for the region. Haddad said that it has only been 50 years since Tunisia's independence, a blink of the eye, but they have done a lot and have much yet to do. Rep. Schiff noted that democracy is a constant process of improvement and the United States is still working on it.

One of the women parliamentarians noted that one of Obama's first actions was to sign into law the equal pay for equal work legislation. The Tunisian parliamentarians primarily discussed their interests outside their parliamentary roles. Rep. Manzullo raised the issue of the American Cooperative School of Tunis. He said the problems the school is facing could lead to its closure, which would also affect Embassy personnel. In the light of the generosity of the US toward Tunisia the 9 million dinar tax bill levied against the school was a big concern. Congressman Schiff also raised the ACST privately with Tijani Haddad.

¶13. (U) The CODEL did not clear this cable before leaving Tunisia.

Godec